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Joshua Neustein Light on the Ashes

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Light on the Ashes

August 10 – October 2, 1996

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art

Essays by Arthur Danto, Jeff Fleming, and Susan Lubowsky Talbott

Acknowledgments

SECCA is proud to join with seventeen North Carolina arts institutions as a participant in the Israel/North Carolina Cultural Exchange. In an unprecedented cultural collaboration, North Carolina will host the most ambitious survey of Israeli art and culture ever seen in the United States. Initiated by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, the exchange includes exhibitions, film festivals, artist residencies, concerts, and related public programs, and is the arts component of a larger initiative by the state to strengthen business, education, and cultural ties between North Carolina and Israel.

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Susan Lubowsky Talbott, Executive Director
Jeff Fleming, Chief Curator of Exhibitions

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Joshua Neustein

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Joshua Neustein   Light on the Ashes

The Message in the Context

Premiering the Israel/North Carolina Cultural Exchange is SECCA's presentation of *Light on the Ashes*, a site-specific installation by Joshua Neustein, one of Israel's foremost artists. Conceived in reaction to his personal history as seen through recent experiences in North Carolina, *Light on the Ashes* continues Neustein's lifelong investigation of place and belonging.

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Until he was six years old, Neustein and his family were among the ranks of displaced persons who wandered Europe during the aftermath of World War II. They had no political status, no home and no national bonds. Neustein remembers standing on borders as a young child, matching them to the lines he saw on the map. Maps and borders, both real and metaphorical, figure prominently in the art of his later years.

In 1951, Neustein's family immigrated to the United States. The sudden loss of his mother tongue, coupled with family tragedies, produced a sense of severe alienation. America provided stability and a home, but to Neustein it also represented a denial of the events of the war in Europe and of Neustein's own religious background. Although his family was consoled by the Orthodox Hasidic Judaism of their insular Brooklyn community, Neustein experienced a religious crisis. At the seminary, his studies had the unintended effect of distancing him from the very religion that was being promulgated. His voracious readings in history, philosophy, and art challenged the circumscribed tenets of organized religion.

Neustein began to identify with modernists who in some way questioned their ethnic identity—one that always seemed to separate them from the dominant culture. Among those who made a marked impression on Neustein were Kafka, Freud and Wittgenstein, who analyzed and critiqued their own cultures and had a contentious identity as Jews. In time, Neustein came to a view of his past that is, in many ways, typically American. As he has remarked, "European

sources [have] enriched, not displaced, the American spirit."

In 1964, after graduation from City College of New York, Neustein emigrated to Israel. In Israel, he began to use his art to "unravel or perhaps disown my various identities." He is still uneasy with this issue: "I'm always renegotiating my context. I'm a Polish, Jewish, American who spent a lot of time in Israel, and I don't want my art to be seen solely as an ethnic form of expression but as art that may have an ethnic base." Neustein spent seventeen years in Israel, and the art he created there is underpinned with the themes of displacement, belonging, and safety.

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Although Neustein began his artistic career with a one-man painting show at Bertha Urdang Gallery in Jerusalem, conventional painting did not interest him for long. In 1968 he began a series of installations that laid the conceptual groundwork for his art of the next three decades. The ambiguities surrounding issues of safety and borders provoked Neustein to produce a series of conceptual works that "displaced" aspects of the Israeli landscape. In *Roadpiece* (1971), Neustein metaphorically pulled a section of the landscape into the gallery. Fourteen bales of hay were divided by a tar-paper road emitting the sounds of highway traffic. That same year, Neustein collaborated with G. Marx and G. Battle to create "a bit of alchemy" by running a river of sound through the dry *wadi* in Abu Tor, Jerusalem. He taped all the rivers, springs, streams, and waterfalls in Israel (which are few), and mixed the audio to conjure up a new river composed of fifty loudspeakers sunk into the ground. The sounds of running water matched the pitch of the landscape. It was a river of ancient history—one that Neustein had seen on medieval maps and read of in biblical texts. In 1973, at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, Neustein gathered pine needles, cones, and branches for *The Sound of Pine Cones Opening in the Sun.* His piece was to be created and exhibited only if he returned from the war. In November of that year,

the "harvest" of pines was exhibited in Tel Aviv.

Neustein's subsequent projects continued his interventions into the landscape, but focused on borders. *Territorial Imperative* (1976) involved a male dog who marked his territory by urinating along the Israeli/Syrian border. Neustein re-staged this project at borders in Belfast, Northern Ireland; Krusa, Denmark; and at Dokumenta 6 (the international exposition at Kassel, Germany), where the piece was removed under pressure from the East German government. In 1983, at the height of the Lebanese war, Neustein created *Still Life* on the embattled border. He built a life-sized phantom jet from rubber tires and set it on fire. The piece burned for days, until the earth was deeply scorched, resembling the "shadow" of the plane. Rubber tires are the Arabs' weapon of choice for civil violence. They use them for protest and sabotage, burning them on highways and traffic intersections. But Israel has its own weapon of choice: the phantom jet. Neustein's combination of the two weapons simply yielded scorched earth. The line between the conceptual and the real was blurred beyond distinction when Israeli soldiers noticed what they took to be a burning plane and descended from their positions to investigate the scene.

Neustein was still preoccupied with what he calls chronic violence as late as 1990. In *The Wedding,* he addresses the fears that create outcasts on a community level and can lead to violence on a national level. Based on a folk tale (but one that has been edited for the artist's purpose), *The Wedding* is about fear of strangers. Shown in Poland, Germany, and the United States, *The Wedding* comprised Neustein's signature bales of hay, an oriental carpet, theatrical lighting, and a video monitor that ran the following narrative in the language of the host country:

> A man was marrying off his daughter in a farm town. He invited his neighbors, the local people as well as an old friend of the family, a doctor from the city. As the ceremonies began, a gust of wind lifted

> tablecloths, upset plates of food and disrupted the wedding. The people turned to the minister who was to perform the service, for an explanation. What was happening? This sudden wind, was it an omen? Was the match wrong? The reverend announced that the match was good. But there was an outsider at the wedding party there among them, and he was the cause of the wind. A murmur went through the crowd. They cast their eyes on the stranger. The father of the bride, apologetic and embarrassed, approached the doctor and escorted him to his car. After the guest had left, the wind stopped and the celebration resumed.

Neustein's symbolic wedding drew together icons of technology and pre-technology to tap the fears of a collective unconscious. Gallery visitors from each country had different reactions. The Poles responded defensively, believing the piece was about them. The Germans seemed to regard the piece as a metaphor for their own immigration issues. Los Angeles viewers, who are also mired in immigration problems, seemed most engaged by the television.

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Maps, which function to delineate borders, have always figured prominently in Neustein's *oeuvre*. His pictorial vocabulary of maps, borders, and landscape fragments expanded during the 1990s to include the chandelier. Thus, to political and geographic symbolism, Neustein added a symbol of society, culture, and class. In *How History Becomes Geography* (1990), a chandelier hangs above a map of the old world. Sheets of glass stacked on top of the map correspond to statistics of violence in the twentieth century. The densest areas of glass represent locations of the greatest incidence of violence. While the stacked glass obscures the map underneath, the hovering chandelier is reflected most strongly in the highest sheets of glass. Geography is obfuscated and all is blurred in an unreadable reflection of world history.

At SECCA, Neustein has fabricated a huge chandelier, but the map beneath it is circumscribed—its purview local rather than global. A path cut through ashes replicates the original town plan of Salem, North Carolina, a city that grew to be Winston-Salem. Like Israel, Salem was a sanctuary for religious outcasts from Europe who sought safe haven on a new continent. The Moravian sect that established Salem in the eighteenth century was an insular community, where non-Moravians were referred to as "strangers." Like the guest in *The Wedding*, outsiders were publicly marked by their difference, separated from the dominant Moravian culture. On a wider community level, the Moravians set themselves apart from surrounding plantation life.

Walking the path of *Light on the Ashes*, one wonders what has been obfuscated by the veil of history and the glimmer of crystal. The ashes that remain are disquieting. They recall a past in which belonging was critical to survival and displacement led to the wilderness.

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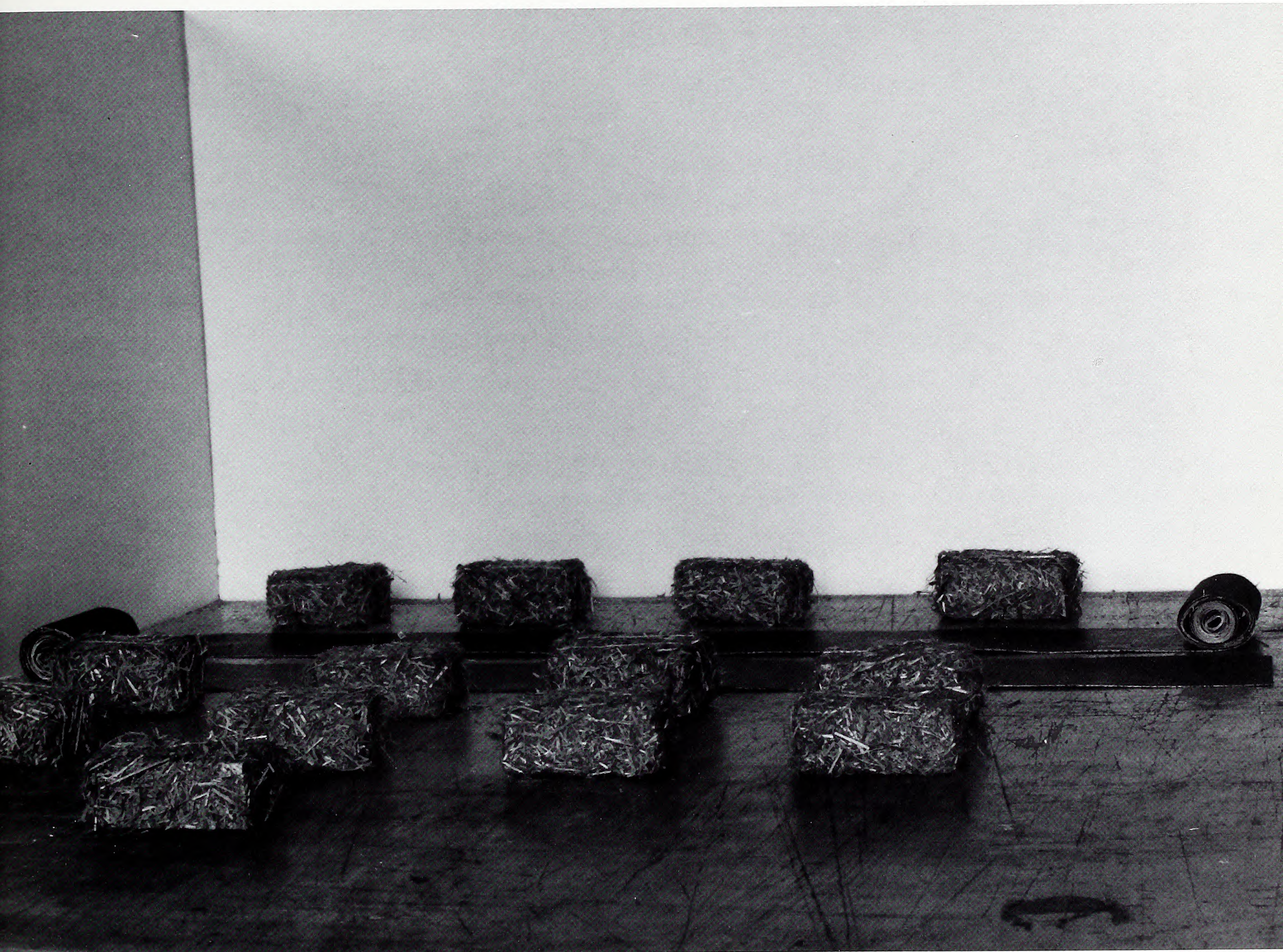
Displaced from Europe, educated and formed in America, drawn to Israel, Joshua Neustein uses selected elements of his past to enrich his art. His recurrent themes of displacement, belonging, and safety are universal themes in the history of all immigrant nations—including both the United States and Israel. His installation at SECCA connects the Israeli and North Carolinian experiences through the universal bonds of art.

Susan Lubowsky Talbott, Executive Director

Road Piece, 1971
Hay bales, tar paper, and sound of
highway traffic
Tel Aviv Museum, Israel



Jerusalem River Project, 1971
In collaboration with G. Marx
and G. Battle
Fifty loudspeakers with four
sound tracks
Collection of the Israel Museum,
Jerusalem, and the Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston, Massachusetts

The Sound of Pine Cones Opening in the Sun, 1973
Pine cones, pine needles, and pine branches
Yod Fat Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel

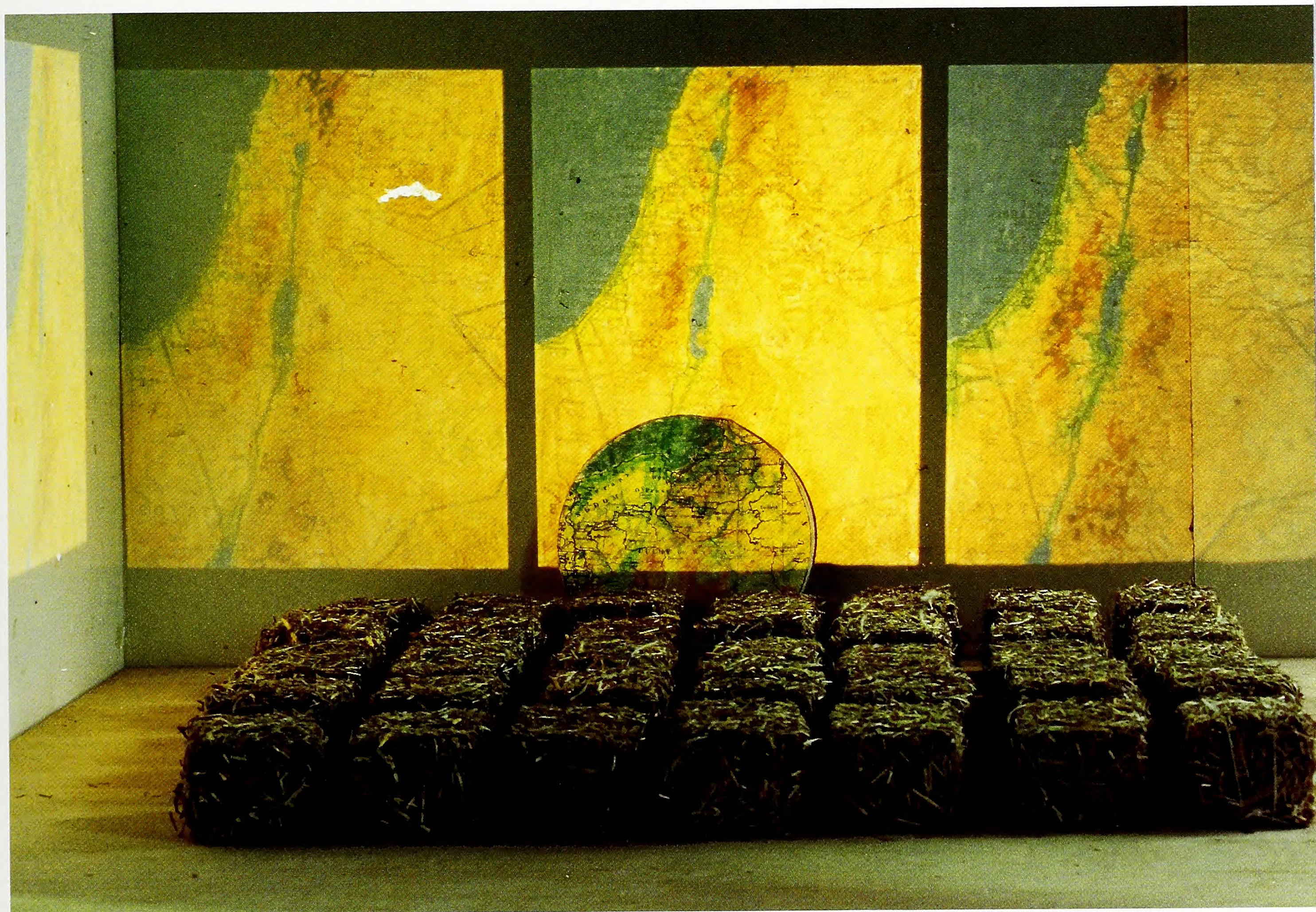
Territorial Imperative
Action on Golan Heights,
Israeli / Syrian border, 1976
Action near Kassel on East / West
German border, 1977
Action in Belfast, Northern
Ireland, 1977
Action in Krusa on Danish / German
border, 1978

Still Life, 1983
Burning rubber tires
Action on Israeli/Lebanese border

Where are the Miami Indians?, 1983
Cinder blocks, wood, clay,
two windows, and mirror
Court House Square, Dayton, Ohio

Fractured Locations, 1988
Hay bales, glass, slide projectors,
maps of Russia and the United States
Artist's studio, New York City

The Blind Patriot of the Sun, 1989
Hay bales, plywood, projected cartographic map, sound of insects and insecticide canisters
Vincent Van Gogh Centennial Project for Dutch Television



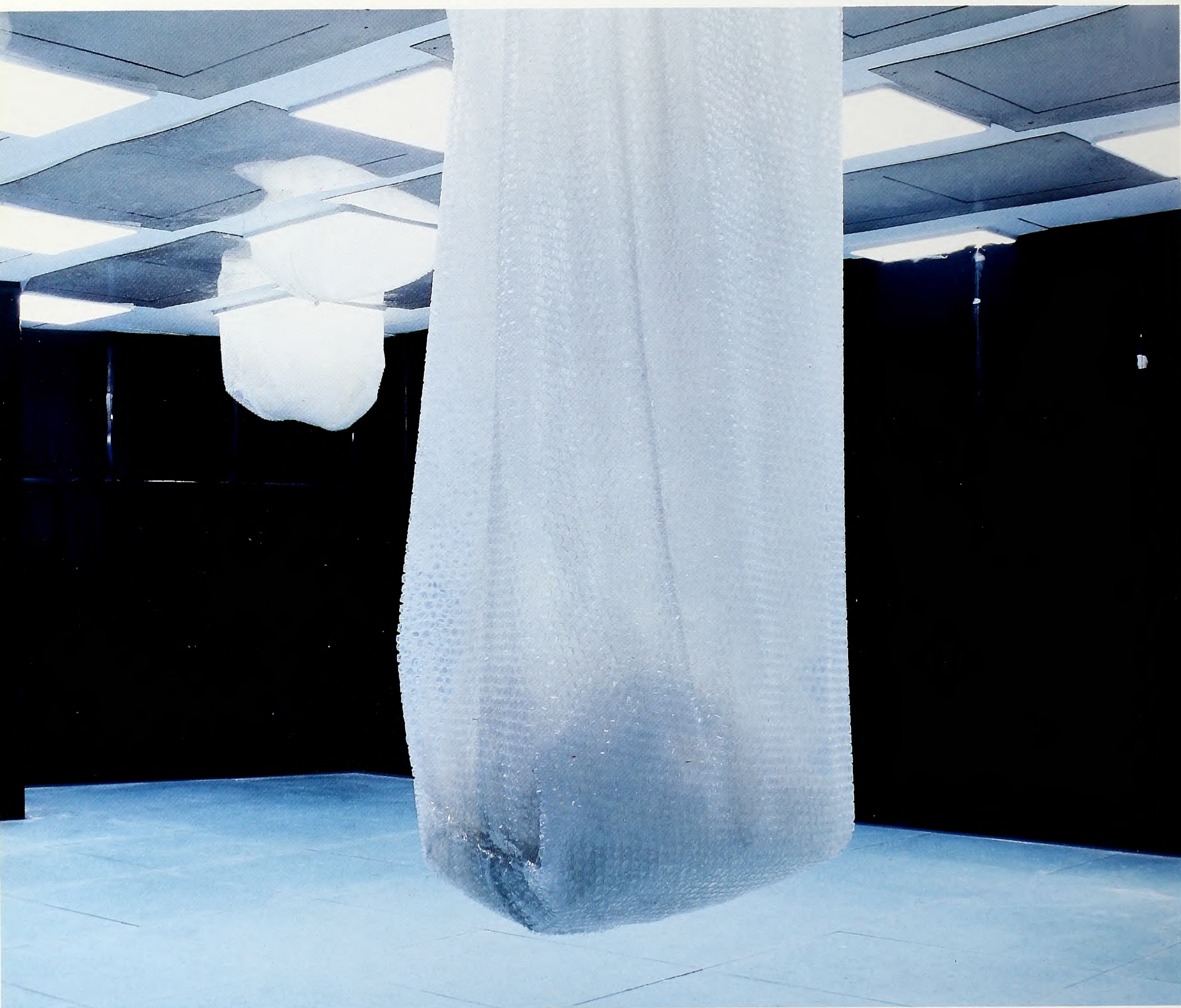
How History Became Geography,
1990
Painted map of "Old World," glass, and chandelier
Barbican Arts Centre, London, England
Collection of Rita and Arturo Schwarz, Milan, Italy, for the Israel Museum, Jerusalem

The Wedding
Hay bales, leeko light, oriental carpet, video monitor with text
Schauspielhaus, Düsseldorf, Germany, 1990
Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1993
Grohman Palace, Lodz, Poland, 1993

Laurels and Ashes, 1995
Chandelier, ash, and laurel wreaths
Galerie Hubertus Wunschik,
Düsseldorf, Germany

The Possessed Library, 1995
Venice Biennale, Italy
Archive of Baron Scarpia: Books and microfilms from the national library in Jerusalem and Puccini score for *Tosca* on mylar

The Possessed Library, 1995
Venice Biennale, Italy
Tosca Room: Bubble wrap, glass, soot, and cast alphabet



The Possessed Library, 1995
Venice Biennale, Italy
Exterior view: scaffolding, glass,
and text

The Message in the Ashes

To give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. —Isaiah 61:3

Galleries are dedicated spaces, governed by a complex set of conventions that define the relationship in which works of art are intended to stand to those who enter the gallery to be in their presence. These relationships have standardly been with paintings or with sculptures, objects of high visual interest that visitors come to look at and to enjoy. The gallery itself, which makes these experiences possible, is generally not itself a further object of aesthetic scrutiny or pleasure, and, lest it distract from the interest of the objects it makes accessible, it aspires to a certain neutrality in this regard. The architectural expression of neutrality is the well-known "white cube," uniformly illuminated and emptied of everything but its emptiness. As a space it should carry no meanings beyond those implied by its dedication. It is pure symbolic nothingness, like the blank page or the silent space of the concert chamber.

But even when the gallery has its own architectural identity, as when the museum that contains it is a structure that did not originate as a museum but rather as a palace or some other official structure, the gallery can achieve neutrality as long as it forms no part of the meaning of the works it contains and is not something to which those works refer. This concept of gallery neutrality means that the works themselves have a sort of metaphysical portability. They carry their references and meanings with them, wherever they are shown, and are altogether self-contained.

It is not internal to the concept of art that works of art be metaphysically portable, but the overall effect of the museum as an institution, and the gallery as dedicated space, has been to treat them as if they were. An altarpiece, for example, refers to the kind of space for which it was made—a chapel, say—and has as part of its meaning that the figures it represents are to be worshipped. Veronese's *Wedding Feast at Cana,* now in the Louvre, refers to the fact that it was sited in a refectory, and that clerics, eating in its presence, were in tacit communion with the feasting figures in the painting, and in the

presence of Jesus, responsible for the miracle of food and wine. Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Rosary,* now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, refers internally to the space of a chapel, in which the figures praying are part of the group kneeling at the feet of Saint Domenik. Both are powerful, beautiful paintings, but the relationships they imply are vastly more meaningful and essentially more important than those compassed by aesthetic delectation. But the conventions of the gallery space exclude our eating in the presence of the one, or falling to our knees in acknowledgment of the vision shown in the other. When the forces of Napoleon tore Veronese's masterpiece from the refectory walls and carted it to Paris, it became, like Cassandra in ancient tales, a symbol of military might and victory, stripped of its powers and reduced to an object of delectation. And so with Caravaggio's great work, whose intended site has been forgotten. It is a triumph of the Napoleonic gesture that these and other works have been deprived of their essential meaning, forced to conform to the iron commandments of the art gallery, and to be related to only under the conventions that govern our relationship to visually interesting objects. Aesthetic philosophy has defined them as objects of pure disinterested perception.

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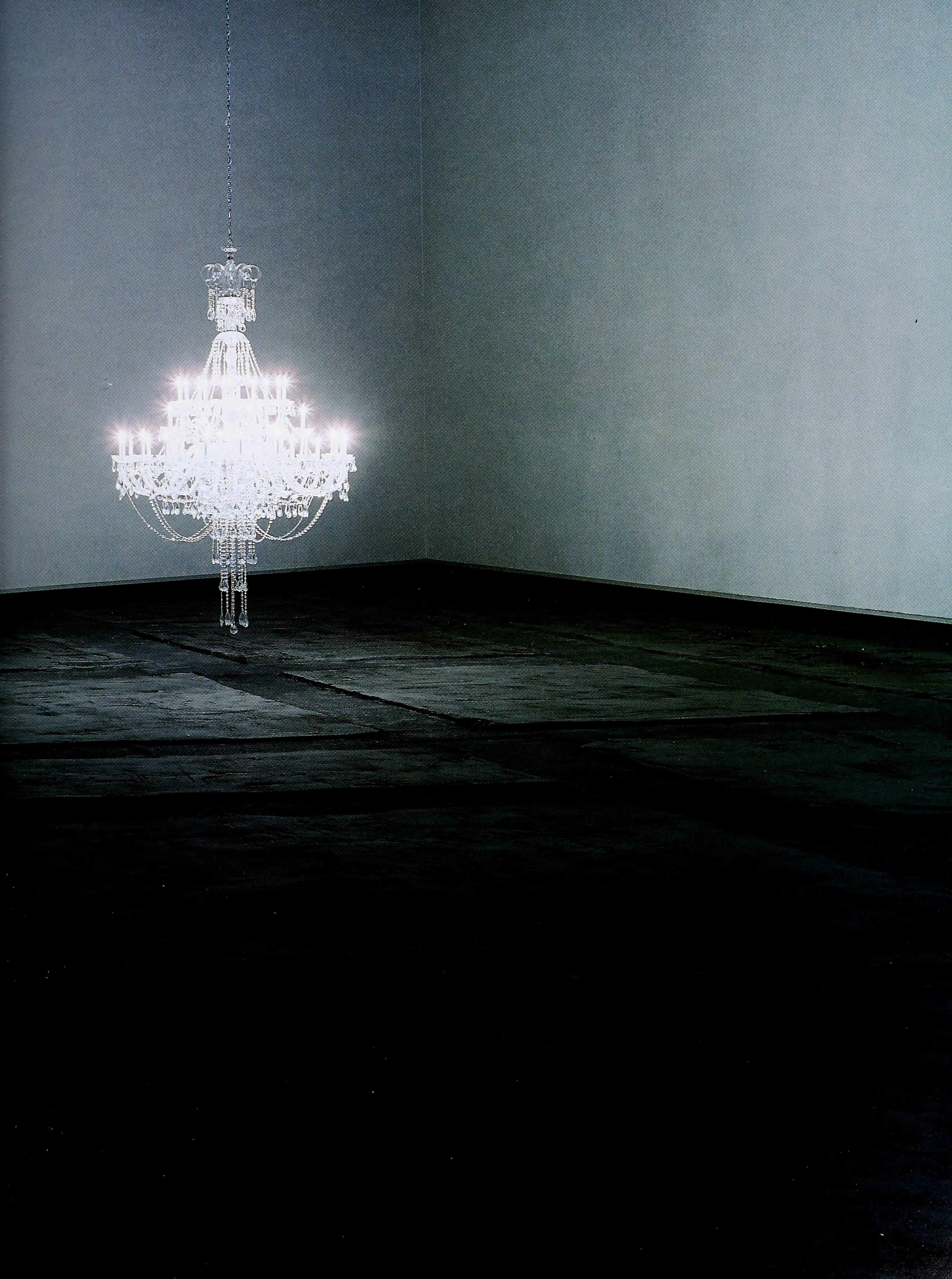
The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art could easily have organized an instructive exhibition of the works of Joshua Neustein in its spacious Potter Gallery by arraying drawings, models, and sculptural works along its walls and in display cases or on bases, together with wall texts explaining what one was looking at. That indeed is the standard form in which an artist's work is exhibited, and it would be altogether consistent with this format that the exhibition travel from venue to venue, with no differences other than those imposed by local architectural circumstance and particular curatorial taste. One cannot, of course, overestimate the extent to which these differences impact upon our experience of the works displayed.



preceding pages:
Light on the Ashes, 1996
Chandelier, ash, and cast clay alphabet
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Seeing Brancusi's sculptures at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, to cite a recent example, proved palpably different from seeing them at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Admittedly, various strategies of display and illumination in both venues were calculated to enhance our experience of the work, but these would not, except in the eyes of professionals, call attention to themselves, and would respect the principle of neutrality entailed by the concept of the gallery as dedicated space. Because neither site formed part either of the meaning or the reference of Brancusi's works, they retained their metaphysical portability and could be set up in any suitably dedicated space. And so it would be were the Potter Gallery simply one venue for the aggregated works of Joshua Neustein.

But Neustein's work *Light on the Ashes* renounces this format, and with it, metaphysical portability. It is installed in a very different way from that in which works are customarily hung or placed in galleries. It seeks an internal relationship to the space and indeed to the site of the museum itself. The internal relationship means that the work is not in the space the way an object is in a box: It incorporates the space into itself in such a way that one does not enter the gallery to experience an artwork separate and detachable from it—one enters the artwork itself, which incorporates the space as part of what it is. The space, one might say, has been re-dedicated, and is now—since work and space are, for the lifetime of the exhibition—as inseparable from the work as body is from soul. "I am not in my body the way a pilot is in a ship," Descartes declares at the end of his great meditation on first metaphysical principles. Here, the work is not simply in the space—the space is in the work. The presence of the work transforms the space into a property of itself, vesting it with a meaning internal to the work, which sacrifices its portability to achieve this intimacy. One cannot thus experience work and space separately from one another. One can only dismantle the work, returning the space to its original dedication.

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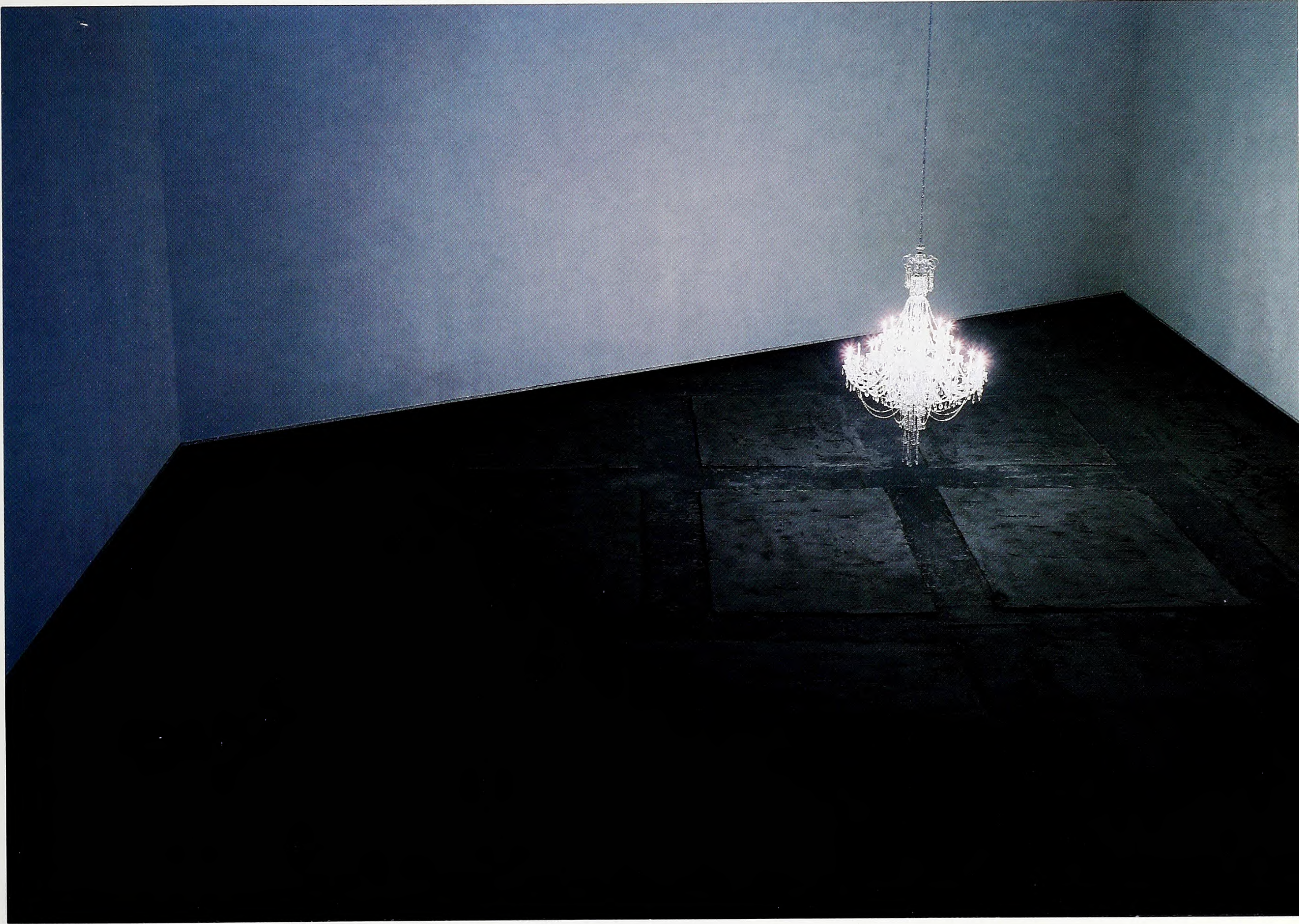
One way Neustein achieves this transformation of the space is by the tremendous chandelier that is suspended at a negligible distance from the "floor," rather than, as is common with such fixtures, at a negligible distance from the "ceiling." I surround these terms—as I would surround the word "walls"—with single quotes to mark the fact that these components of a room have themselves been transformed through the space having been folded into the structure of the work. What had been the floor is now something else, an expanse of indeterminate dimensions holding a map of Salem at a certain point in Salem's history. The map is enlarged so that its drawn streets have become paths that constrain the visitors' movements through the space, very much as if one were walking through the city itself: One does not, after all, walk through buildings to get from one street to another. The work internalizes the complex geometry of its own site at a defining moment of its history: It is specific to its own site, as Veronese's *Cena* is specific to the refectory whose space it glorifies and completes. The "ceiling" is there only to mark the conventionally appropriate location of the chandelier, which instead is at the same level as we are, dislocating us spatially as the map dislocates us in terms of scale.

Neustein has transformed the Potter Gallery into a bubble of dream-space in which we are encapsulated, as when we dream about ourselves moving through worlds that displace the relationships that define the waking world. We look across and down at a fixture intended to be seen from below, and tower above the landscape like Gulliver mincing along Lilliputian streets. The Potter Gallery is a high room, 20 feet from floor to ceiling. It is as well an ample room, with a floor space of 4,000 square feet. Under artistic transformation, the space is indeterminately high, the way the sky is, and indeterminately large, its boundaries like the edge of the dream-field, circumscribe a space without being part of it. That conduces to its dreamlikeness.



Let me attempt to distinguish "transformation" from "transfiguration," using for this purpose the presence of chandeliers. There is a chandelier, familiar to anyone who has studied the history of art, in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*. In no way is van Eyck's chandelier as opulently ornamental as the Baroque fixture Neustein had fabricated for this work, but it is luxurious enough for its time, and it displays a high degree of artisanship in its facture. It is of fiercely polished brass, and, like Neustein's chandelier, it seems to have moved into a lower register of its already low room, so that one feels that it is in the same space as the connubial pair, making, as it were, a third, bestowing light upon them rather than merely illuminating the space in which they stand. In truth, it hardly illuminates at all, since it holds only a single candle where there are holders for eight, and bright daylight, sufficient to illuminate the room by itself, streams amply in through the window. These two anomalies can, of course, be given naturalistic explanations—that the lit single candle is central to a ceremony in which a sacrament intersects with the law, no matter how bright the atmosphere. It can testify to a practice in Flanders in the fifteenth century, as the room's expensive furnishings inform us of the scheme of interior decoration suited to members of a merchant aristocracy: Look at the bride's elaborate and costly gown! But in fact, according to a famous article devoted to this painting by Erwin Panofsky, the single lit candle—"symbol of the all-seeing wisdom of God"—transfigures a mere domestic interior into "a room hallowed by sacramental associations." Needless to say, this could be true of the actual bridal chamber as much as of the painted one, and what Panofsky is anxious to establish is that, in actuality or in art, we are dealing with "a transfigured reality." It is a transfigured reality when it exists simultaneously on two planes, architectural and symbolic. According to Panofsky, "the symbols are chosen and placed in such a way that what is possibly meant to express an allegorical meaning, at the same time perfectly 'fits' into a landscape or an interior appar-

ently taken from life." So in this remarkable work, in Panofsky's view, "medieval symbolism and modern realism are so perfectly reconciled that the former has become inherent in the latter."

The concept of transfiguration has had a great importance for me in thinking through cases in modern art in which a work of art so resembles an ordinary object that the question becomes acute as to where the difference between them is to be located, since it is inscrutable to visual perception. The perceptual textures of both are sufficiently indiscernible that one could easily suppose, while looking at the artwork, that one were merely regarding a quite ordinary thing. Similarly, in the *Arnolfini Wedding*, one might simply look at the depiction of a room, and admire it for its realism, when in truth the ordinary objects arrayed within it carry so powerful a symbolic weight that that room is transfigured into a space that is quite special.

An art gallery could in this respect be transfigured if it were possible to experience it as an art gallery, without recognizing that it had become another kind of space. In Neustein's installation, the gallery has been not transfigured but transformed, in the sense that while one doubtless knows, in experiencing the work, that it is an art gallery, this knowledge is external to the experience of the work itself. It has been metamorphosed into a space of a different order, leaving its identity as a dedicated space behind, rather in the way the stage is transformed into the plain before Troy, or the wall before Thebes, or into a street in Verona, or into the ramparts in Elsinore. And the dramatically lowered chandelier is the main engine of this transformation.

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It is part of the language of furniture that chandeliers declare that the room they dominate to be public spaces. Their light is celebratory; they belong in ballrooms, in salons, in spaces of official reception. In dining rooms, the faceted crystal of their ornaments catch the flames of candles set beneath them, and reflect in the stemware

and polished plate; they sparkle in sympathy with brilliant conversation and scintillating wine. Chandeliers transform everyone caught in their illumination into creatures of light, raised for this occasion to an exalted level of being, completing, like a singular accessory, the elaborate gowns, the radiant complexions, the dazzling jewels or medals or tiaras.

The chandelier in Neustein's work is an opulence of cut crystal and faceted beads, effulgent pendants and swags of inter-reflected light, which by rights belongs to the upper part of the room it glorifies, where it would define a luminescent center, the way the great chandelier does in Adolf Menzel's 1852 painting of *Flute Concerto of Frederick the Great at Sans Souci,* in which the virtuoso monarch is shown, in powdered wig, performing for a distinguished company in a mirrored salon, which reflects and re-reflects its dazzle. "I only did it to paint the chandelier," Menzel said, but it is clear that the chandelier is a metaphor of and a compliment to Frederick as the embodiment of enlightenment. The audience is bathed in the chandelier's (and the monarch's) light, which creates an ambient darkness around the favored personages—an outer darkness for those distant from the music and the noble presence. Menzel has elaborated a set of symbols that relate to the role of chandeliers in life, and presents us with a transfigured reality quite as much as does Jan van Eyck. A chandelier performs the same transfigurative role, with whatever success, in a photograph of a reception at the White House in Andy Warhol's book *America.* Warhol, with his singular pitch for symbolism, created a work (1976–86) consisting of four identical photographs, stitched together with threads, of a set of chandeliers. There are chandeliers embedded in black paint in a number of works by Ross Bleckner, such as his elegiac painting *Fallen Summer* (1988).

The chandelier in these works is a symbol of hope, as light always is, but at the same time a sign for that aspect of the human condition that occasions hope, namely its inherent and inseparable

tragedy. It is the order of hope Saint Paul has specifically in mind when it forms for him, with faith and charity, a triad of what theologians designated "supernatural" virtues, to distinguish them from the "natural" virtues of classical moral philosophy.

The first mystery of Neustein's installation is that he has retained the symbolic connotations of the chandelier but lowered it dramatically, so that it sits just above the ground, like a burning bush, so that there is no way for us to stand beneath it. The chandelier defines the visual center of the area the visitor traverses upon entering the space, and there can be little doubt that it defines the moral center of the space itself. It radiates an aura of just the sorts of meanings the chandelier conveys in van Eyck and in Bleckner, or in Warhol. We enter from the sort of outer darkness Menzel paints so marvelously, and because we have entered the work—because we do not stand outside it as in the standard gallery experience—we ourselves are "put in a new light," which it is up to us to interpret. The position of the chandelier implies, I believe, that the light in which we are put is indeed new. We are drawn to the light—not a possibility if the light is above us and out of reach—and we have to make our way to it by tracing the paths of the mapscape, as if a maze. The experience, at a metaphorical level, is clearly intended to be transformative.

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Let us now concentrate on the street map of Salem, North Carolina, as it was drawn in 1839, seventy-three years after the first trees were cleared from its intended site in the midst of Wachovia—an area named after Wachau, the ancient seat of the Zinzendorf family in Austria, in tribute to Nicholas Lewis, Count Zinzendorf, benefactor and guide to members of what came to be known as the Moravian Church.

When Protestant forces were defeated in Moravia in the Thirty Years War, the victorious Catholics undertook to extirpate Protestantism as a religious practice, forcing its adherents to flee or to con-

vert. The Moravian fellowship—the Unitas Fratrum—could scarcely resubmit to the hierarchy of Catholic authority, since its members were dedicated to re-enacting in their own lives what they perceived as the lost simplicity of Christian life in Apostolic times, and to treating the Bible as the single authority on questions of life and faith. By opening his vast estates in Saxony to the Moravians in 1722, Count Zinzendorf had made it possible for those who crossed the border to form a settlement based on these convictions. The Moravian settlement in Saxony became a beacon and a model for like-minded Christians elsewhere, and it was Count Zinzendorf's inspiration that it should be exported to the New World, where haven might be found from the continuing religious turmoil of Europe, and a base established for evangelical missions among the native Americans. Salem was to be just such a haven and base of missionary operations, a site ordained, in the view of the Moravian Governing Board in Saxony, by Jesus Christ himself. Indeed, Jesus was regarded not only as the Savior, but as the chief elder of the ideal community of "brothers and sisters" that Salem was intended to be.

Moravian Church Archives,
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

The principal streets and squares were systematically laid out in February 1766.

In Neustein's map, the streets of Salem are pathways through ashes, but how the ashes are to be interpreted is the second mystery of the work. Like the chandelier, ashes constitute an evocative rather than a precise symbol. The artist wavered for some time between using what he termed "common clay"—the actual soil of the region—rather than the end product of burned local vegetation—"tobacco plants, hickory wood, cotton, stubble of any kind of the region." Clay and ashes alike have both a metaphoric power and specific references to the site and history of Salem, but the alternative titles, *Light on the Ashes* or *Light over Common Clay* imply different meanings for the substance in which the map is traced. My sense is that the artist made the right choice, for though the actual soil proved suited to the

manufacture of the bricks and tiles from which many of the town's permanent dwellings were made, the idea of rising from the ashes connects the founding of a city with the history of persecution: Jan Huss was after all burned at the stake.

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Neustein's two dominant symbols—the chandelier and the map—are knotted together in terms of nationalist heritage and possible religious history. The chandelier is specifically Bohemian glass, and Bohemia together with Moravia was the soil that nourished the Unitas Fratrum. Since the Baroque was the style of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Baroque-Bohemian style of the chandelier may emblematize Catholicism as the map drawn either in ashes or in common clay emblematizes Protestantism.

This makes room for an ambiguity as to how to interpret the cast letters—the third component of the work—which Neustein has scattered over the surface and covered with ashes in such a way that their shape remains visible. Are the letters, half buried in the "soil," driven underground by the lamp or do they rise from the soil to be in its presence? In an earlier proposal, Neustein refers to the carpet of ashes as a "seed-bed," which assigns to the letters the role of seeds. One of the leading exiles from Moravia, Bishop Johan Amos Comenius, expressed the hope that, despite the bitter repression, there might lie a "hidden seed" in the forests of Moravia, from which a rebirth of Unitas might come. That happened, of course, in Saxony in the 1720s and then in North Carolina in the 1750s, so it might be possible to interpret the letters, buried but half visible, as the "hidden seed."

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The complex symbolism of chandelier, ashes, and letters ought not to be treated merely as a code to be deciphered. Each evokes an aura of meanings, which overlap and interpenetrate to form an atmosphere of intersecting themes. Moreover, the meaning of the work

Map of Salem, 1839
Courtesy of Herrnhut Archives, Germany

cannot merely have to do with the circumstances of Salem's founding in the eighteenth century: It must somehow speak to us today, and have something to do with our own lives.

One feels that the contrast between, on the one hand, the ashes and the map site of Salem, symbolizing the possibility of the pure and simple life, and, on the other, the crystal opulence of the great chandelier, must hold the key to this work. But it is very difficult to find the key, if only because of the extreme ambiguity of the chandelier and ash-field as symbols. The chandelier implies hierarchy, power, and domination. Historically it emblematizes the Counter-Reformation and the Holy Roman Empire, and the Latin liturgy. The map inscribed in ashes emblematizes a community of equals, passive resistance, the Protestant Reformation, and vernacular languages, which make the Bible's authority accessible to all who can read.

But at the same time the lamp is what Wordsworth describes as "the celestial light," which is lowered to the level of "every common sight," as if, as in Christian cosmology, God mingled his luminescence with the soil and ashes of human flesh, infused history with eternity to achieve salvation for us through enfleshment—and this tremendous drama is being enacted in Salem, the New Jerusalem! After all, the distribution of the letters is at its densest in the area of greatest illumination, just under the light. Not just we, who enter the work, are drawn to the light: being drawn to the light is enacted by "the hidden seed." The letters physically imply that there is some meaning beneath the ashes, which the light attempts to draw out. The letters, ashes, and lamp re-enact in a way our own effort to uncover—to unveil—the meaning of the work we are experiencing.

Furthermore, the chandelier is not, as might have been expected, centered over the "commons" of Salem, even if it does define the space's visual center. It is, rather, at one of the town's boundaries, as if marking a boundary in its own right, between the town and the wilderness out of which it is carved. The undifferentiated wilderness

spreads edgelessly outward: The walls of the space in which the work is installed do not mark real boundaries, which is a further mark of the difference between the space of the work and the space of the gallery. Wilderness is, after all, not a rectangular area. The Stadtplan is like a grid stamped onto the Wachovian clay, implying, in its regularity, that sense of well-orderedness that defined the life of the founders. The Moravians were aesthetically sensitive: "The proportions of the houses are good, and with their regular placing and their tile roofs, they make a not unpleasing appearance," an eyewitness wrote in 1768. The form of life was austere but not ascetic. There was music, there was cheer, there was the sense of fulfilling Providence through founding a city, whether one saw this as rising from the ashes of history or through the imposition of a rational order onto the soil of wilderness.

But whether through interpretation we can impose a rational order on Neustein's work as a whole is another question. Everything—the lamp, the ashes, the letters—is multiply ambiguous and powerfully symbolic. Furthermore, it must be remembered that we are not external to the work we then seek to rationalize. We complete the work by entering it and making it our own. But each of us must complete it in a different way. And—who knows?—this may say something about using the Bible as the final authority for morality and truth. The readers complete the Bible by interpretation, and each interpretation is individual.

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In the initial formulation of his proposal for this installation, Joshua Neustein wrote, "I shall look for testimony, for witnesses that will take possession of my piece. Maybe I shall discover a portion of my own missing history. Something that modifies belonging. Something belonging to me." Well, the chandelier may be read as a fixture that evolves from the candelabrum, hanging rather than sitting, fixed rather than portable, as dwellings become permanent (like the brick

and tile houses of Salem) rather than temporary, like tents, or Salem's first timbered cabins.

There is a famous candelabrum in the Bible, one that a curiously finicky God orders Moses to construct. It is a very ornate candelabrum for what after all was a desert people, but it was to be placed in a sanctuary fit for God, and to represent an offering and a sacrifice on the part of the children of Israel "that I might dwell among them." Perhaps light and God are sufficiently one that where there is light there is God. The candelabrum was to be made of pure gold, and God specifies its structure in remarkable detail.

> Of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: his shaft and his branches, his bowls, his knops, his flowers, shall be of the same.
>
> And six branches shall come out of the sides of it: three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side:
>
> Three bowls made like unto almonds, with a knop and a flower in one branch; and three bowls made like almonds in the other branch, with a knop and a flower: so in the six branches that come out of the candlestick.
>
> And in the candlestick shall be four bowls made like unto almonds, with their knops and flowers.
>
> And there shall be a knop under two branches of the same, and a knop under two branches of the same, according to the six branches that proceed out of the candlestick.
>
> Their knops and branches shall be of the same: all it shall be one beaten work of pure gold.
>
> And thou shalt make the seven lamps thereof: and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they may give light against it.

The specification goes on, and God commands that Moses follow a pattern that had been shown him during the time he had been with

God on the mount for "forty days and forty nights." It is clear that God means for the sanctuary to be a replica of his own dwelling.

There were ten candelabra in the first Temple, but only one in the Second Temple, to imply a continuity with the tabernacle Moses built. This was taken to Rome upon the destruction of Jerusalem, and housed in the Temple of Vespasian. We can still see it carried as a trophy on the Arch of Titus, as a symbol of the defeat and destruction of the Israelites. It is the emblem of dwelling, and of diaspora. When one conjoins this potent symbol with the reflection that Salem is an ancient and poetic name for Jerusalem—the emblematic capital of what was for so long for the wandering the lost homeland, how should an Israeli artist not belong, and how should this not be a piece of his own missing history? Home and history, loss and recovery, oppression and overcoming, light and human darkness, beauty and ashes, politics and return, the darkness of Europe and America as the New Jerusalem: These are among the themes enacted here. The rest must be found by each who engages with the work.

Arthur C. Danto, Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Columbia University, and art critic for the Nation

The Message in the Culture

Joshua Neustein's *Light on the Ashes* continues his search for the origins of cultural identity. Exploring the notion that cultural identity is rooted in the concept of place, Neustein uses the history of the city of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to investigate the nature of cultural relationships and the process of how cultures grow to dominance and subordination. Ultimately, Neustein's investigation of cultural identity is an attempt to find his own place within the world.

Neustein's personal history has been a journey of discovery. Born in Danzig, Poland, in the aftermath of World War II, Neustein moved from place to place as a child. He eventually came to the United States, emigrated to Israel, and then returned to the United States, where he now lives. But Neustein questions the emphasis on national heritage in determining personal identity. Although he prefers not to accept a label of Israeli, Jewish, or American, Neustein nevertheless realizes that personal identity is formed by life experiences. And so it is with Winston-Salem and the many communities that make up the surrounding area, each with its own history of growth, death, and intrigue. Together they make up the character of piedmont North Carolina, a region that is vastly different from other regions, yet shares in the same human experiences.

The history of Winston-Salem is well suited to Neustein's enterprise. The frontier community of Salem was founded in 1766 by a group of Moravians, a Protestant sect from Pennsylvania and earlier from eastern Europe. The Moravians came to the western piedmont of North Carolina to worship as they wished, free from the pressures of opposing religious doctrines. They developed a structured society, each individual with his or her responsibilities and place within the order. Moravians in Salem formed a collective community, organized to provide mutual support in the effort to survive the hardships of frontier life. The Moravians proved to be successful craftsmen and entrepreneurs, and the village became a trading and cultural center with interests in music, brewing, tanning, agriculture, and ceramics.

The village of Salem was a wholly independent community, but in the mid-nineteenth century, in Salem, as in America as a whole, the influences of the outside world gradually began to infiltrate. Neustein and the early Moravians share a personal history of displacement, both part of a larger, dominant culture, and also separate. It is this duality—the dominant or the collective identity versus the individual or the subordinate identity—that Neustein explores in *Light on the Ashes*.

During the past year Neustein has visited Winston-Salem to research its history and character. He investigated the state's literary tradition by reading contemporary North Carolina writers, and he explored the physical landscape of the region, becoming fascinated by man's intervention in the natural order. He also visited the Moravian Church Archives. The archives houses maps, church records, and minutes of council or collegium meetings. These records contain a wealth of information, both about the place and about the community. But Neustein is well aware of the problems inherent in trying to discern the character of a place through cursory investigation, which could easily lead to stereotypes and clichés. So instead of dwelling on first impressions, Neustein chose to infer the history of Winston-Salem through the use of specific and general symbols. Combining a 1839 map of Salem, ashes, the soil of the region, letters of the alphabet, and a large, cut-glass chandelier, he creates an aura of the community and a sense of its history.

The map of Salem depicts the early layout of the village, complete with streets, the town square, and its two churches, one for the white community and one for slaves. Lists and text in the margins provide information on land ownership and bits of description. Neustein recreates the map with coal ash from a power plant that provides electricity to a major cigarette manufacturing facility, laid out to mimic the early plan of the village. The ash houses memories of the past—many of its ghosts still haunt the region. The ash sym-

bolizes the history of Salem with its promise of a life well-lived, but with intolerance and dark corners. It also refers to the universal, to the past of all cultures.

Neustein makes use of local clay—greenish-gray, but fired to a blood red—from a Jugtown pottery, an important site in North Carolina's ceramic tradition. By pressing the very earth that surrounds and upholds the city into letters of the alphabet, Neustein references language, its history, and its ability (or lack of ability) to carry meaning. The clay, now language sprinkled throughout the ash and ready to sprout, both sustains and absorbs the life of the region.

Neustein's last symbol is an enormous chandelier, a luminous spectacle, decadent with the weight of its tradition. It holds the promises of the now dominant Western culture that eventually destroys those outside it—often by absorbing it. Hovering over Salem, and over culture in general, the chandelier symbolizes the dominant culture that controls language, thought, and the representation of history.

Every community and individual has its own history—each with full meaning and significance. But the influence of the individual or the culture upon other individuals and cultures is unmistakably hierarchical. Today, leading world cultural centers, such as New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Nairobi, London, Cologne, and Tokyo, via the power of the media and their positions of authority, seem to hold dominance over less powerful cultural centers such as Winston-Salem. It is difficult, if not impossible, for dominant cultures to accept the authenticity of culture from other areas, even from other dominant cultures. They may be given a reading, but, as Neustein believes, they are usually considered less significant.

Neustein has described himself as an integrated alien, and in many ways, the inhabitants of Salem were the same—helping to define the culture of the region, yet apart from it. Although his history is one of searching for a place, a home, Neustein is very much a part of the larger cultural arena. While he successfully creates a dialogue

through exhibitions in New York, Germany, and Israel, he is also a "stranger"—ironically the term used by the early Moravians to refer to non-Moravians. In this installation we see the interaction of numerous cultures, both of the locale and of the artist. Neustein participates in this interaction by locating his art in relation to world culture, and thus himself in relation to others. He positions his art as an allegory for all human experience. Each individual is part of a collective community, but is also a culture unto him/herself. History may be a fiction, but human experience in its many forms is not.

Winston-Salem has a sense of place, but according to whose description? Certainly not the description of Joshua Neustein, the "stranger." But we can verify Neustein's larger reference to history as an individual, yet universal, experience, and to the power of individual and subjective thought. And this is the strength of Neustein's work.

Jeff Fleming, Chief Curator of Exhibitions

Joshua Neustein
Born 1940, Danzig, Poland
Lives in New York

Special Projects

1995 "The Possessed Library," Israeli Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
1990–93 "The Wedding," Schauspielhaus, Düsseldorf, Germany; Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles; and Grohman Palace, Lodz, Poland
1988 "Gold Shït," environmental action performed in Israel, London, Rio de Janeiro
1983 "Still Life," installation on the Lebanese border
1980 "Where Are the Miami Indians?," City Beautiful Council, Dayton, Ohio
1976–78 "Territorial Imperative" (parallel biological and political border demarcation performance), Golan Heights; Krusa, Denmark; Belfast, Northern Ireland; Kassel, Germany
1971 "Barrier Piece: A Photographic Replacement Dealing with Barriers in the Line of Vision," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
1970 "Jerusalem River Project: Sounds of Flowing River, in the Dry Wadi of Abu Por" (with G. Marx and G. Battle), Israel Museum, Jerusalem
"Road Piece, Displaced Landscape with Bales of Hay," Tel Aviv Museum
1969 "Boots, An Event with 17,000 Pairs of Old Boots" (with G. Battle), Artists' House, Jerusalem
"Hay Bales and Hay Bindings," Tel Aviv Museum
1968 "Rainwater," Artists' House, Jerusalem

Select Solo Exhibitions

1996 "Ketav: Flesh and Word in Israeli Art," Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
"Recent Works," Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv
"Carbon Series and Magnetic Drawings," Berlin Shafir Gallery, New York
1995 "Magnetic Drawings," Wynn Kramarsky, New York, coordinated by Berlin Shafir Gallery, New York
1994 "The Carbon Series," Sara Levi Gallery, Tel Aviv
1993 "The Carbon Series and Still Life on the Border," Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York
"Neustein: Early and Late Works," Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York
1992 "The Carbon Series," Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
1989–90 "Territory/Territory," Philadelphia Museum of Judaica, Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
1987 "Joshua Neustein," Exit Art, New York
1984 "Drawings," Gallery X+, Brussels, Belgium
"Drawings," Givon Gallery, Tel Aviv
1983 "Joshua Neustein, The Bethlehem Series 1980–83," Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
"Three Paper Works by Joshua Neustein on Exhibit at Saint Peter's Church," Saint Peter's Church, A Congregation of the Lutheran Church in America, New York

"Joshua Neustein's Maps," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
"Drawings 1983, Joshua Neustein," Israel Museum, de Menasce Gallery, Jerusalem
1979 "Nistar," Givon Gallery, Tel Aviv
1978 "Neustein Recent Works," Velar Gallery, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
"Neustein," Mary Boone Gallery, New York
1977 "Neustein: Ten Years Works on Paper," Tel Aviv Museum
1974 "Joshua Neustein Drawings 1970–1973," Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York
"The Sound of Pine Cones Opening in the Sun," and "Hay Bales and Hay Bindings," Yodfat Gallery, Tel Aviv
1972 "Jerusalem River Project," Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris
1971 "Travel Art," Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England

Select Group Exhibitions

1995 "The German Deserter" (with Felix Doeze and Jochen Gertz), Gallerie Hubertus Wunchik, Düsseldorf, Germany
"Co-Existence," Artists Museum, Mitzpe Ramon, Israel
"The Arturo Schwarz Collection," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
1994 "Free Falling," Berlin Shafir Gallery, New York
"Modulating the Exhibition," Berlin Shafir Gallery, New York
"Beyond Drawing II," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
1993 "Locus," Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles
"Construction in Process," Stark Gallery, New York
"My Home is Your Home 'The Wedding,'" Artists Museum, Lodz, Poland
"In the Trace of the Track," Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv
"Look Who's Talking?," Schauspielhaus, Düsseldorf, Germany
1992 "Geographic Ambivalence," Berlin Shafir Gallery, New York
"The Seventies," Artifact Gallery, Tel Aviv
1991 "Israeli Artists," Image Gallery, Stockbridge, Massachusetts
"Pillars of Patriotism," Artist's Studio Installation, New York
"Blind Patriot of the Sun," Homage to Van Gogh 100th Anniversary for Dutch TV-VPRO, New York
1990–91 "Chagall to Kitaj: Jewish Experience in Twentieth Century Art," Barbican Art Centre, London
1990 "On Paper/In Paper/With Paper: 100 Twentieth-Century Works from the Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
1989 "In the Shadow of Conflict: Israeli Art 1980–1989," Jewish Museum, New York
1988 "Israeli Artists," Image Gallery, Stockbridge, Massachusetts
1987 "Immigrants and Refugees/Heroes or Villains," Exit Art, New York
1986–87 "Art and Exaltation: Treasures of the Jewish Museum," Jewish Museum, New York
1986 "Four Israeli Artists," Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine
"The Disciplined Spirit," Exit Art, New York
"Abstract Energy Now," Islip Art Museum, East Islip, New York
"The Concerned Eye," Port of History Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
1985–86 "The American Experience: Contemporary Immigrant Artists," organized by Independent Curators, Inc., New York; traveled to Bass Museum of Art, Miami, Florida; The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences, Peoria, Illinois
1985 "Personal Visions: The Batkin Collection of Israeli Art, The Furman Collection of Jewish Ceremonial Art, The Schulman Collection of Twentieth Century Art," Jewish Museum, New York
1984 "The Rational Factor in Works by Israeli Artists," Haifa Museum of Modern Art, Haifa, Israel
1983 "Israeli Artists," Image Gallery, Stockbridge, Massachusetts
1982 "Laurie Anderson, Farrell Brickhouse, Scott Burton, Denise Green, Wolfgang Laib, Joshua Neustein, Lucio Pozzi, Martin Puryear, Haim Steinbach," David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island
"Bilder Sind Nicht Verboten," Städtische Kunstalle, Düsseldorf, Germany
"Here and Now, Israeli Art, Painting and Sculpture, Drawing, Photography, Video," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
1981 "New Directions: A Selection from the Commodities Corporation Art Collection, Princeton, New Jersey," Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

1980 "Karen Shaw, Joshua Neustein, Moshe Kupferman, Rocky Theis, Daniel Babior," Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York
"Contemporary Drawings and Watercolors," Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York
"Marking Black," Bronx Museum, New York
"Borders," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
"With Paper, About Paper," Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
"Boundaries," Israel Museum, Jerusalem

1979–80 "Barbara Abrams, Heidi Gluck, Moshe Kupferman, Joshua Neustein, Karen Shaw, Kay Walkingstick," Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York

1979 "Eleventh International Biennial Exhibition of Prints in Tokyo," organized by The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan; traveled to The National Museum of Art, Osaka, and Museum of Modern Art, Hokkaido, Sapporo
"New Work New Media," Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

1978–79 "Seven Artists in Israel 1948–1978," organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; traveled to The Brooklyn Museum, New York

1978 "Exhibitions from the Museum Collections on the Occasion of Its Re-Opening," Haifa Museum of Modern Art, Haifa, Israel

1977 "Ten Artists from Israel," Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humelbaek, Denmark
"Ben Haim, Efrat, Gitlin, Neustein, Schwartz, (and others)," Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York

1976 "Photography Triennale," Israel Museum, Jerusalem

1975 "Three Israeli Artists: Gross, Kupferman, Neustein," Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts

1974 "Beyond Drawing," I.M. Cohen Graphic Gallery, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

1972 "Twenty-five Years of Art in Israel from Landscape to Abstraction (From Abstraction to Nature)," Israel Museum, Spertus Hall, Jerusalem

1971 "Concepts + Information," Israel Museum, Spertus Hall, Jerusalem
"Travel Art," organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England; traveled to Northern Arts Gallery, England
"Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Elements of Art," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts

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Ventrocq, Marcia. "The Birthday Biennale: Coming Home to Europe," *Art in America*, Sept.

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1992 Licata, Elizabeth. "Saga of Modernism, Captured in Paper," *ARTnews*, 13 Oct.
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1990 *Nomadism.* Israel Museum. Text by Sarit Shapira.

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Art in the Shadow of Conflict. Jewish Museum, New York. Text by Susan Tumarkin–Goodman

1988 Morgan, Robert. Review. *Flash Art,* March.

1987 *Mapping Out Strategies of Dislocation.* Exit Art, New York. Text by Irit Rogoff.

Neustein's Law. Exit Art, New York. Text by Klaus Ottmann.

The Road Not Taken. Exit Art, New York. Text by Jeanette Ingberman.

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